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30 years with TR Fastenings



2020 marks 30 years with TR Fastenings for Glenda Roberts. She recently stepped down from the Trifast plc Board, as she considers her retirement plans and will be working on special projects. She has seen the company grow from a UK business to become a global Full Service Provider.

Here editor Will Lowry, speaks to Glenda about how the Group, and the market, has developed over the last three decades, and about future opportunities.

Although Glenda is celebrating her 30th anniversary at TR Fastenings, she's actually been in the industry a little longer. Before joining TR, she had been with another fastener company for seven years. "When I first joined, TR had already positioned itself between the manufacturer and the customer. It was a smaller company with 8 sites focused very much on the UK market – and it was doing very nicely developing JIT fastener supply systems inside larger customers".

Then Glenda remembers that a standard enquiry could take two to four weeks to complete using post, telex and fax machines. "Developments such as the internet and email connected us to the world, and really helped us to take a leap forward. Mobile phones weren't commonplace when I first joined the company. Very few people had them, and everyone was nervous about using them because of the cost - how far have we come today when everyone wants instant responses?"

In 1998, TR Fastenings decided to expand outside of the

UK, largely because its customers and other businesses were migrating to countries with lower manufacturing costs. "We would have lost these customers if we hadn't taken that decision," says Glenda. "I was asked to put together a global team and to follow the business initially to China and India. That success led TR to open operations in other parts of the world to support global customers."

"We carried the processes and the direct line style feed systems from the UK to the new customer locations. Not only did this help to keep the business, it was a big success story for us. We made it easy for companies setting up in these new areas to have consistency of supply, processes and services. Continuing this successful strategy, TR Fastenings opened operations in America, China and India and has continued that strategy today adding Hungary, Italy, Germany, Spain, Thailand and the Philippines in recent years. Focusing on large global companies, and our tier one suppliers, rather than going after local business, was undoubtedly the best thing we did. We worked with companies that needed the services and support that they were used to getting from the UK and Europe."

"Working with these multi nationals, and their global commodity teams, enabled us to demonstrate how well we could service them almost anywhere. Consequently, they were keen for us to work with them in other countries, and so we were able to meet their needs at their locations – whether in Europe, America, or Asia."

Wherever customers have moved geographically, TR has identified opportunities to acquire manufacturing





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businesses already established within those geographic markets.

"This was another big step in our development as adding manufacturing sites to the group meant we weren't just another distributor – we were now a full-service provider and it gave us gravitas", Glenda says. "By evolving our engineering and technical support services, we were able to work more closely with customers on applications and solutions."

"We now have eight manufacturing sites – 32 sites in total. We are also proud of the 36 master distributors who support us, especially in areas where we need geographical coverage. They are integral to our Group and have enabled us to get our proprietary branded products to customers as quickly and effectively as possible."

Application engineering and technical support

TR sees this as a key part of its success story, and this enables the company to work closely with its customers with early involvement at the design and development stage.

"A high percentage of the parts we supply are dedicated customer specials to customer drawings. But often there is a need for technical input to assist and this is where our engineering teams are involved", explains Glenda.

"Building up these relationships and supporting the different disciplines on a customer's site encompassing quality, logistics, sourcing and technical demonstrates that we understand their needs and can meet their requirements."

"Whilst working with customers has become easier, their requirements have become much more demanding over time", Glenda tells me. "They have very specific needs and wants. There's also a lot more documentation these days, with more detailed work involved. We even have in house lawyers to deal with the vagaries of the contracts that each new piece of business entails. Some companies might see this as a challenge, but thanks to our experience, knowledge and capabilities, we are more than able to meet these requests. This hopefully helps us stand out." Glenda continues, "We are no longer just supplying a humble fastening; these products do an important job and could be involved in a safety critical application. Therefore, guaranteeing quality and reliability is essential."

"A lot of contracts, especially for the automotive market, can be for five to ten years. This means we have to make sure we get everything right and are flexible enough to accommodate any changes that might happen. Customers have heightened expectations on quality with zero ppm as a requirement. However, we believe it's really about having a zero-defect philosophy – because that encompasses everything we try to do".

Handling Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented and certainly has proved one of the most challenging times in Glenda's 30 years at TR.

"Because our operations are located around the world, we felt the impact of the virus from the first outbreak in China, and we monitored this as it spread globally," says Glenda.





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"Our first concern was to make sure our staff were safe, and all of the correct health and safety protocols were in place. After this we focused on supporting our customers and our vendors." TR set up a Covid-19 task force, which included the board and key personnel, to help it manage its supply chains and customer base. "When you are an FSP there is no buffer as you are the only line of supply. "As part of our business continuity plan that originally was put in place during the SARS outbreak, we looked at all the risk factors, the numbers of weeks stock and in WIP for every customer special. Then we mapped out where our vendors were based compared to the virus epicentres. This enabled us to stand back and evaluate whether we had supply issues looming. We went into minute detail as it was no small task, but it was important to do it thoroughly. There have been challenges along the way, but customers have not been impacted and we have had great support from our vendor base."

Glenda believes the next challenge is the length of time it will take markets to get back to 'normal' post Covid-19. "The pandemic will undoubtedly impact companies – particularly those in the automotive industry, and liquidity will become a critical factor for many. The shape of recovery will also have a huge impact. Will it be a 'U' curve, a 'V' curve or a fast return to a new normal? She believes the next three months will give us a good indication of how things will develop. "TR is in a strong position financially, so we can manage the current situation. It won't slow us down or prevent us from focusing on opportunities and interesting markets for the future."

Future opportunities

"Coming out of the pandemic we see opportunities in providing even more product to the Medical industry. The move to 5G and the infrastructure requirements is another area of focus as we have worked on projects for 3G and 4G in previous years."

"But the key and potentially the largest growth area is in supporting builds in the EV sector which is the future. If Covid-19 has taught us anything it is that our health and welfare is paramount, and a cleaner environment is essential. We will have to adapt to the materials we'll be working with in the future, such as composites, and how we adapt to any new opportunities this may create. For instance, we are currently looking into silver plating for fasteners, which is not as common, but this is required along with the need for electro-static finishes in applications involving EV batteries. This is an example of how we are being pulled into new areas and providing the right products for these applications. These new opportunities are fastener rich which is good for our industry and I think we are all in for an interesting time".

Credit:

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